DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 213 265 FL 012 802

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TITLE Whose Reality? Mismatch of Perceptions of ESL Pupils and Teachers in Britain.
PUB DATE Dec 81
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the International Conference of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (16th, London, December 18-21, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black Students; *Cultural Awareness; Curriculum Design; Elementary Education; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Minority Groups; Multicultural Education; Preschool Education; *Racial Bias; Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS United Kingdom; *West Indians

ABSTRACT

The role of the specialist in English as a Second Language (ESL) in sensitizing colleagues, administrators and politicians to the mismatch of perceptions in the classroom and in helping establish and consolidate links with the minority communities is discussed. Seven factors said to contribute to the underachievement of children of Caribbean origin in Great Britain are reviewed in order to point out the mismatch. These factors are: (1) racism in schools, (2) racism in society, (3) inappropriate curriculum and examination syllabi, (4) inadequate preschool provision, (5) linguistic difficulties, (6) teachers' low expectations of West Indian pupils, and (7) loss of trust and understanding between teachers and West Indian parents. A welcoming acceptance of cultural diversity and a spirit of tolerant pluralism should underlie discussions between parents and teachers. The ESL teacher must be prepared to be a "change agent" within the school, mediating between the perceptions and aspiration of the child and the generally low expectations of colleagues, being available to explain the strengths and weaknesses of having a bicultural background and being able to inform on the deficit hypothesis and lead towards the repertoire approach to language. Discussion includes the role of the ESL teacher and ESL materials and the training of teachers (initial, induction, and inservice). (Author/JK)

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ED213265

WHOSE REALITY? MISMATCH OF PERCEPTIONS OF ESL PUPILS AND TEACHERS IN BRITAIN

Paper delivered at the Sixteenth International Conference of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL). Goldsmith's College, University of London, December 18th - 21st 1981.

The theme of the conference was "Reality" and/or "Realism" in the EFL/ESL class.

R.J. Collet. Resources Centre, Bedford.

The Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups was set up by the Labour Minister of Education, Shirley Williams, in 1979, after a decade of concern and controversy over the educational attainment of black pupils in British schools. When the Conservatives formed a new government in 1979 the appointment and terms of reference of the Committee were reaffirmed by the incoming Minister, Mark Carlisle:

> Recognising the contribution of schools in preparing all pupils for life in a society which is both multiracial and culturally diverse, the Committee is required to:
>
> > review in relation to schools the educational needs and attainments of children from ethnic minority groups taking account, as necessary, of factors outside the formal education system relevant to school performance, including influence in early childhood and prospects for school leavers;
> >
> > consider the potential value of instituting arrangements for keeping under review the educational performance of different ethnic minority groups, and what those arrangements might be;
> >
> > consider the most effective use of resources for these purposes; and to make recommendations.

(Linguists may care to savour the tantalising participle which leads off: "Recognising....." Who is doing the recognising? Not the Government, as one might expect, or hope, but the Committee itself! And is this "contribution of schools...." something actual or hypothetical?)

The Committee, composed of minority and majority cultures, teachers and non-teachers, never had the unanimous co-operation of the profession; opinions ranging from "what we need is action now, not another couple of years' talking-shop and research," to the pseudo-intellectual "black kids must be genetically inferior, since they perform less well in tests set by us white middle-class Anglo-Saxons". The Committee had a daunting task in trying to reconcile the high-principled commitment to a just and harmonious multi-racial educational system, from some of the professional organisations, with the practice they saw in the classrooms, and most strikingly from the evidence they received from the community. For they took "evidence" from evening meetings with parents' groups, and tapped in to a seam of bubbling volcano beneath the surface of society, hidden from public view by the "professional" system which in some cases doesn't allow parents over the school threshold, except on the school's terms.

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In Bedford, for example, a group of West Indian parents wrote:

> "we would like to see schools develop as places where the emphasis on attainment, as you perceive it to be, didn't leave our children feeling failures, and all the attendant negative emotions that accompany such a poor estimation of one's self worth. We feel that schools should not opt out of recognising that being Black in White Britain brings various pressures; we want schools to move away from the antiquated assumption that something about our culture and colour is synonymous with something inferior and something that does not merit recognition. We want to move away from the feeling that God made us in a hurry in the night, and forgot to paint us white. We want teachers to sort out their inherent prejudices, and face up to the fact that although we have much in common with disadvantaged Whites, and although we're in the same boat, we're on different decks"

The fact that the expression of opinions such as this came as a shock to many colleagues only emphasises how far the two sides - the teachers and the taught - have drifted apart. This is why I am concerned with the mismatch of perceptions between the two sides of the classroom, convinced that any effective progress in ESL must come from a greater sharing of 'reality' between all involved in education.

It does not contradict my argument that the Rampton Committee was concerned at this stage with children of Caribbean origin, and that its interim report was entitled, "West Indian Children (sic) in our Schools": many of the criticisms levelled at teachers will doubtless be repeated when the Committee makes its full report on all ethnic minority children. And although traditionally children of Caribbean origin have fallen outside the responsibility of the ESL teacher (the RSA, for example, acknowledges them in ESL classes only if they originate in a region speaking French-or Spanish-based Creole) my contention is that if we - the ESL specialists - don't help them, few others will. Because of our training and experience we are well placed to sensitise staffroom colleagues, administrators and politicians, and to help establish and consolidate links with the minority communities. At least our day-to-day toiling at the interface of languages and cultures qualifies us to intervene in a debate which is otherwise somewhat sterile, and frequently uninformed, or misleading. As an example of an unhelpful contribution, here is a quote from a recent paper by Alan Little:

> "There are two reasons for the better performance of Asians than pupils of West Indian origin, one of which is speculative, and one of which can be documented. The speculative one is what children bring to school, the empirical one what they receive there. Asian children come from stable cultural backgrounds with their own languages, religions, cultures and values which include prizing learning for its own sake and encouraging striving for self-improvement. This gives the child a clear sense of its own ethnic identity and personal worth quite independent of the dominent culture's reaction to it. This is not true of West Indians, whose cultural background is essentially a variant of the dominent culture, which to no small extent disparages, and even rejects their colour." (my emphasis)

Anyway, the Committee, after internal controversies and some resignations, after a few rewritings, presented its report to the Minister, who after a number of months, published it without even the customary courtesy of a foreword commending the contents and disclaiming any financial support for the recommendations. The timing could not have been worse, half-way through a lack-lustre administration in the middle of a financial crisis, and a long way from the next electoral manifestos. A cynic might say that the only consequence of the report so far has been the resignation of Anthony Rampton as Chairman and his replacement by Lord Swann, whose main report will now appear in 1983.

Let me summarise the findings of the report in brief: evidence, especially from school leavers' examination results, suggests that children of Caribbean origin are underachieving in relation to their peers. Seven factors are suggested that contribute to underachievement:

1. Racism in schools.
2. Racism in society.
3. Inappropriate curriculum and examination syllabuses.
4. Inadequate pre-school provision.
5. Linguistic difficulties.
6. Teachers' low expectations of West Indian pupils.
7. Loss of trust and understanding between teachers and West Indian parents.

I would like to look again at some of these factors, from the point of view of the black child or parent wherever possible, in order to point up the 'mismatch' I referred to earlier. I am sure that many of the catagories refer equally to Asian children, despite a more positive stereotype in people's minds with regard to academic performance. But as Rampton himself points out, in a recent article, "Asians" is a generalisation. "The Mirpuris of Bradford, the Sikhs of Southall, the Bengalis of Tower Hamlets and the populations that come from East Africa have neither country of origin, culture, religion or language in common. Is it not therefore very likely that the figures relating to Asians in the survey hide a much <u>greater</u> variation than those for any of the <u>other</u> school-leavers?"

First, the racism in schools, intentional or unintentional. This is a complex of negative teacher attitudes[1], stereotyping of pupils from ethnic minorities, and deliberate lack of adjustment of teaching or organisational strategies - "I treat them all the same - I'm colour-blind". These attitudes are understandable, but not excusable, given the long tradition of most of Britain of being monocultural and monolingual; where bilingualism is seen first as a abberation, then as rather deviant, then as a handicap, and then finally ignored completely - "it's not nice to draw attention to it".

[1] "We've had mixed ability; we've gone community, and now its bloody multicultural" Quoted by Sally Tomlinson (1981)

The 'silent majority' response was expressed not long ago, in a report similar to Rampton, in the United States, by Daniel Patrick Moynihan "Change the deviants, not the system". Many of us might argue the reverse: look at the system, and change the system to accommodate the "deviants"; a yardstick of the civilisation of a society is how it treats its minority groups of whatever category, and how far they are accomodated within the system.

Some of us would even argue that it is the monolingual, monocultural schools - the all-white institutions - which are disadvantaged in these times of social mobility, of global interdependence and Britain's developing status as a multicultural society. A welcoming acceptance of cultural diversity and a spirit of tolerant pluralism should underlie the dialogue between parents and teachers; in this way we might work to avoid the negative message that the pupil receives, a second-class education. "I told the careers teacher I wanted to be an air-hostess as I liked meeting a variety of people, so he said try to get a job in Woolworth's, you meet plenty of people there." (Our People).

The racist signals that the school sends out, are often clearest as it deals with the "problem" of the bilingual child; segregated for a long period into an isolated unit, lacking professional or social liaison with parents and then subjected to inappropriate tests and examinations, and to 'pax Britannica' syllabuses, text books and teaching methods.

Lord Scarman in his recent, much-acclaimed, report, could find no evidence of "institutional racism"in this country, by which he presumably means organisations with racist clauses in their constitution, or notices outside their gates like the one displayed outside a Shanghai park before the revolution: "No dogs or Chinese allowed". Evidence of such institutional racism <u>is</u> however available in nearly every school in the country, if you look at the daily round, from the school assembly, through school dinners, through recreation and extra-mural activities, and in the forms and norms of teacher/pupil interaction that are encouraged or repressed.

Evidence of racism within the school is hardly surprising if one sees it as a microcosm of a society which is quite clearly racist - if you happen to be black, and distinctly "institutionally racist" if you examine the procedures for the processing of entrants to this country, and just some of the incredible practices of the last year or so; virginity tests at Heathrow on Asian ladies, X-ray tests on children's bones in India to verify their ages; the Vietnamese, only here because a ship's captain or two defied the orders coming out of Whitehall "Let them drown - we've no room in Britain"; the Filopinos, deported as a punishment for failing to give information they were not asked for when they arrived here ten years ago; the plans to check "foreigners'" passports when they arrive at hospitals; the passing of the Nationality Act, still a source of disquiet to many lawyers, churchmen - and most minorities; the 'fishing raids' carried out by the police, rounding up whole factory or shop workforces, seeking out illegal immigrants; the proportion of black people in the statistics of 'sus', - people arrested for crimes that had not yet been comitted; the numbers regularly stopped and searched for dubious behaviour such as carrying a bag in broad daylight (and being black) or walking home after the last bus has gone (and being black). We - or the people representing us - treat a section of the British people in this way - and <u>we</u> have the cheek to turn around and accuse them of having a chip on their shoulder!

The reality of being black (I mean non-European ethnic minority) in a white society permeates every aspect of one's waking - and probably dreaming - life, every encounter with politicians, the media, the organs of law and order, the social services. And if you're black you can't switch off this concern at five o'clock each day; over 8,000 officially noted racialist attacks were carried out on ethnic minority families and homes lastyear, according to a Home Office report. The teacher - especially the ESL teacher - cannot shrug off the responsibility to admit this reality, and to attempt to cope with it in personal and professional attitudes. Our teaching materials, for example must be rooted in the reality out there, not floating in some never-never land of RP[1] and afternoon tea. We - white teachers - must define our aims and construct our syllabuses with the same rigour that we would expect for our own children, not be satisfied with the second-rate, ghetto materials for ghetto children. We must examine our planning about the language learners' first and second phases, the skill-getting and the skill-using phases, in Wilga Rivers' terms; how long, and how isolated, should be first stage be? how do we assess that the first stage has been achieved, and what objectives do we set for the second? do these include study-skills techniques and the development of learning strategies across the curriculum, with the ability to verbalise the experience of being a British-born bilingual or bidialectal child, to recognise and confront prejudice, and to make choices between aspects of two cultures in adult life? This seems to require entry into the mainstream of the school, for both ESL learner and teachers, at a much earlier stage than generally occurs. The ESL teacher must be prepared to be used as a "change agent" within the school, mediating between the perceptions and aspirations of the child and the generally low expectations of colleagues, being available to explain the strengths and weaknesses of having a bi-cultural background (the weakness is, that it is not <u>understood</u> by the white majority)and being able to inform staffroom debate on the "deficit hypothesis" and lead towards the "repertoire" approach to language.

Overall, this means putting into practice the old teaching principle of starting from where the child is; as the Bullock Report puts it:

> "No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act as though school and home represent two totally separate and different cultures which have to be kept firmly apart. The curriculum should reflect many elements of that part of his life which a child lives outside school."

The role of the ESL teacher then includes:

1. to be a mediator and facilitator in home/school relationships;
2. to be a source of information on language and culture within the school;
3. to use the expertise to the benefit of <u>all</u> children in the school, through collaborative learning strategies;
4. to acquire and disseminate ideas on good practice in techniques, materials and examinations.

1 R.P. Received Pronunciation; the prestige accent of standard southern British English that is conventionally conveyed in Language Teaching materials and courses.

The ESL materials should

1. Reflect the reality of the society at large and contain strategies for coping in the widest sense;
2. Respect the linguistic and cultural diversity of the individual and the community; and harness this resource;
3. Facilitate the rapid, successful and appropriate placement of the pupil within the mainstream curriculum; this includes a satisfactory level of intelligibility, fluency and appropriacy in standard English, achieved through, and not at the expense of, the pupils' own languages or dialects.

The training of teachers, initial, induction and in-service must include:

1. Explicit discussion on migration and race relations, backgrounds of ethnic minority groups, workshops on attitudes and prejudice, and basic concepts in language and cultural identity.
2. An exploration of a multi-cultural perspective to the curriculum.
3. A positive and practical recognition of the value of this approach for all our children.

Underpinning all, there must be an explicit philosophy and rationale for our work in the multiracial school. A number of personal feelings might motivate the teacher to this work including what might be called the missionary, the good samaritan, the ex-colonialist, the radical and the social engineer. These attitudes are quite common, but are of themselves neither necessary nor sufficient to enable one to make a contribution to education for a multicultural society. They may be characterised thus:

the missionary: in general, bringing enlightenment to the benighted heathen, often with open commitment to conversion to Christianity;

the good samaritan: helping those less fortunate than ourselves, seeing ethnic minorities as a species of lame duck;

the ex-colonialist conscience: reparation for our inherited guilt for underdeveloping Africa and Asia;

the radical: anti-authority, anti-establishment, actively expousing minority causes, through ideological conviction or personal gratification;

the social engineer: working in the classroom to spread knowledge, and hence understanding, and thus helping to bring into being a more harmonious society.

This is, for many, of course, a large factor in choosing a career in education. It is perhaps most graphically outlined by Robin Richardson in his sequence: knowledge - concepts - attitudes - behaviour. Knowledge imparted as facts or statistics, for example, lays the basis for concepts to be formed, which will help to shape the learner's attitude, and subsequently behaviour. Contributing to the shaping of a different future, then, while at the same time, as ESL teacher, transmitting the norms of this society; this paradox was summed up by an NUT paper in 1967:

(Education) "is at one and the same time the instrument for the maintenance of an ordered society and the preservation of its accepted ethos..... and for the continuation of its chosen way of life, and yet it must serve as an agency for social change."

The tension between these two 'realities' will be a stimulus for many of us, but the creation of a more harmonious social order is not a valid objective, in purely <u>educational</u> terms. My professional commitment is on the basis of a conviction that the multi-cultural experience is a genuinely educational experience, in the sense that the poet Auden suggested that no-one can know his own culture unless he has lived in at least two others. Such experience is available to us and our pupils today, if only we can learn to respond positively to linguistic and cultural diversity, and learn to learn from each other. The ESL teacher is at the heart of any such educational advance. To succeed in this role we must continually keep in mind the pupils, the parents and the wider community, and keep trying to see the reality of the world from the position of their perceptions and aspirations. Signposts to this reality are all around, if we care to look; in the Rampton Report, for example, and - rather chillingly - in this comment by Rampton in his private capacity:

"..... many black children in our schools must look on the outside world as unremittingly hostile. They do not regard police stations as friendly places where one goes for help if one's house has been burgled..... The speeches that they read are not about the dangers of being swamped by Canadians and Australians. Above all they can see what is likely to happen to them when they leave school..... They can see what has happened to their brothers and sisters, and if they live near Liverpool they will know, even if they did not know before, that of the 26,000 people employed by the local authority, 169 are black."

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